Tecullipocas: *A mixed-media Aztec portrait by Maria Chabiel.*

Latinas Looks

Tonantzin's new group show carries an eclectic charge

I'LL ADMIT IT up front: I went to San Juan Bautista's Galleria Tonantzin in large measure because its current show, *Las Latinas*, includes the work of Maria Chabiel, an art-world acquaintance whose beauty, energy and dignified passion at age 75 astound me nearly as much as her paintings.

But the whole experience—driving past open fields and oak-studded hills along a eucalyptus-bordered highway, munching strawberries and taquitos in the old adobe gallery's patio, and, yes, viewing the show—was a rejuvenation I'd readily recommend for any jaded art lover.

The artists in *Las Latinas* are an eclectic bunch, with styles ranging from Carmen Léon's pastel portraits of female ancestors to Byzantium-meets-Maya lithographs by Maria Aquilar, teeming with celestial hierarchies channeled from a medieval monk or shaman's quill. But the common denominator here, beyond Central or South American forebears, is art originating from a personal impulse, not merely some self-conscious (de)construct.

The welcome lack of attitude was apparent in gallery co-owner Neva Vazquez's decision to show an impromptu, barely dried bit of personal catharsis: a violently brushed figure that emotes frustration and angst the way a quick peek into a blast furnace says "hot." Can't quite afford Mariela de la Paz's mandala prints celebrating all things female? She'll make you a deal on the small, magnetized versions you can put on the refrigerator.

THOSE WHO'VE chalked up frequent-flyer miles on American Airlines out of San Jose International Airport are no doubt familiar with Aquilar's ceramic mural *The Travellers Come to San Jose*, but her ability simultaneously to compress the big picture into a tight composition while playfully expanding the painting past the canvas and onto the frame in a folksy, 3-D continuation of the theme was news to me.

At Tonantzin, Aquilar shows two acrylics on black velvet. *Beach Dogs*, a sharply observed canine ing only in the dark waters blue cast at the inlet. The ever-expanding pyramid of light is split by a coursing, wavy diagonal of gleaming fish that is perpendicular to the estuary shore in the foreground. Ravening gulls zoom in and out of close focus.

Chabiel's psychotropic abstracts of Aztec gods and goddesses seem to transmogrify right before your eyes

Aquilar pushes the scene past the velvet ground, heightening the sensurround effect by adding more birds in relief atop the frame. Viewers are drawn into the picture, which has both an unblinking directness and a sense of the mythopoetic. No wonder Aquilar is a frequently commissioned public artist.

Like shape-shifting masks, Chabiel's psychotropic abstracts of Aztec gods and goddesses seem to transmogrify right before your eyes. A full-on face appears here, a profile there; what first looks something like an eye suddenly takes on the form of a flower. In *Tecullipocas* (the Lord of Duality), the artist mixes modeling paste with white paint, giving depth and texture as well as contrast to a work that eschews perspective.

The wild rhythm of her paintings' movement from one elaborate pattern to the next is fascinating without destroying the work's unity, primarily because Chabiel uses color as a kind of ordering principle. At the same time, color is the emotional engine driving the paintings. There's no straining for effect. We get the feeling that standing at an easel, enraptured in ringing color and exacting designs is the payoff for everything that came before in her life.

ANN ELLIOTT SHERMAN

Las Latinas *runs through May 23 at Galleria Tonantzin, 115 Third St., San Juan Bautista. (408/623-ARTE)*

THU

Featuring: Lucy Manhattan
• Mz Monique

fo

Single
Hour

Thu

Join us at Hamburger M
FREE Happy Hour Drink
Don't M
To attend, simply
Romance
(Must
For your convenience,
in the Metr

Metro

For more information call
408/298-8500

Ann Elliott Sherman, Metro, 1996 May 16-22